Old Blazer's Hero

By DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY.

CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

"Well?" he said almost sullenly, without turning to look at her.

The hand which had touched him very gently and appealingly at first, tightened upon his sleeve and began to tremble strongly. At this he looked over his shoulder and met Hepzibah's beseeching gaze. There were tears in her eyes, and he noticed a curious little throbbing in her throat, as if a pianoforte hammer were tapping from within.

"Don't break your heart, Edward," she besought him, speaking with great difficulty. "Don't go to the bad for her! There's nobody as is worth that, my darling. What good can that do?"

"Don't worry about me, Hepzibah," he said miserably; "it isn't worth while."

"What else have I got to worry for if it ain't the child I nursed when I was a child myself?" said Hepzibah, holding to him with both hands. "And, oh, as I should ever ha' lived to have to ask you such a thing! But, oh, my darling, do, do come home——"

She paused, and Ned filled up the broken sentence.

"Sober, I suppose," he said.

"Oh, do, dear, do!" she begged him, clinging to him.

"Very well," he said, with a gloomy laugh—two little spasmodic sounds, as far from merriment as light from darkness—"you shall have our way for once. You pretty generally get it here."

He stooped and kissed the hard-featured face, and Hepzibah, dropping her head upon his shoulder, clung to him and shook with silent tears and internal sobbings.

"I've got your word, dear?" she asked when she could trust herself to speak.

"Yes," he answered. "Good night, Hepzibah."

He set out on his seven-mile walk, and having posted his letter in the town, turned back. A certain halfway house tugged at him as if it had a cord about his heart, but he broke past it with a rage of resolution, and walked straight home, and at once went up to his own bedroom. Hepzibah heard the assured and steady footstep, and was thankful for the news it brought her, though the feet went like lead, and had not even a memory of their old lightness.

Next morning Ned Blane's criminal pretense was delivered into Mary Hackett's hands, and she felt her heart altogether cheerful and strengthened by it. She wondered still at the personal silence her husband kept, but at least here was proof positive that he was not the heartless creature she had found herself beginning to believe him. He had not found it in his heart to forsake her and to cast her back upon her parents. And she herself could face the world again. He had really gone away on business of some sort; and though she was still inquieted about him, she had no longer the shame of being forced to believe that the affairs he had spoken of were no more than an abominable pretext.

But now came a consequence of the letter which the forger had not anticipated. Before the welcome banknote was so much as broken for the purchase of household necessaries, Mary sat down and wrote a letter to that imaginary John Hargreaves who lived in the imaginary Keston Square:

"Sir—I should be greatly obliged if you would furnish me with my husband's present address. I am afraid that recent letters may have miscarried."

If this little blind was something less than absolutely truthful, she posted it all the same, and salved her conscience with the hope that it might be true. Two or three days later her inquiry came back again, directed and redirected in half a dozen different hands, and at last officially marked "Misdirected; no Keston Square in Brocton." This amazed her and awoke new anxieties. Obviously Will is moving in crooked ways and was in hiding from her. It was easily possible that he might be concealing himself, and, inspired by some feeble hope of meeting him, she took the bus into town day after day and walked wearily up and down the principal thoroughfares, thinking that perchance she might catch sight of him.

She had never known it until now, but she was a little short-sighted, and a thousand times her heart leaped within her in the crowded street as she imagined that at last the errant husband was in sight, and she would advance, fluttering from head to foot, to meet an absolute stranger. No habitude of failure lessened the shock of hope and fear and disappointment, and she would go home at night too tired to care for anything. Her whole life seemed to have grown into one constant dull and empty ache.

It seemed a strange and ghostly sort of life to lead, for she was altogether alone now, and hardly ever exchanged a word, except upon matters of mere necessity, with a fellow creature. She called upon nobody, and nobody called upon her. Those people of the little township who had at first been indignant against John Howarth and his wife for their neglect of their daughter supposed now, naturally enough, since Mary went on living in her husband's house, that the builder supplied the necessary funds, and so forgot their indignation.

CHAPTER XVII.

As if Mary had not had trouble enough upon her shoulders already, a new one descended upon her, and she began to be certain that the house, night after night, was being watched, and became assured that the watcher was always the same person. The first suspicion which occurred to her came when, on a moonlight night about the middle of July, she threw open her bedroom window and looked out upon the deserted road and the tranquil widespread fields. She had no light, and the house and its neighbor threw their joint shadow on the road before her and on to the hedge which faced their doors. Beyond the distinctly marked line of shade upon the field the moonlight lay in a broad, vapory whiteness, in which objects, though easily discernible, took strange and fantastic shapes. She had sat at the open window for a good five minutes, drawing in a sad tranquillity from the moonlight and the silence, when a dry stick cracked behind the hedge and drew her startled gaze to the spot whence the sound proceeded. Following this came complete silence. She listened till the wide air made a singing in her ears like the lingering echo of the waves which children find in seashells. Hearing no repetition of the sound, but suspecting rather than discerning an added bulk of darkness somewhere in the shadows, she closed the window, drew down the blind and watched throught the merest crevice between the bars. That something darker than the shadows began to move, and the cracking sound, heard more faintly through the closed window than before, again reached her ears. The moving object stole under the hedge for twenty or thirty yards, growing distinct from the other shadows whilst it moved, and melting back into them again whenever it stood still; and then, passing over a stile, appeared in the moonlight of the road, at that distance and in that light recognizable only as a man.

Mary never sat at her open window again after this, but she was often tempted to watch, and the watch was almost invariably rewarded by the earlier or later detection of the figure. Who the man was and why he was there she could not guess. But one night, as she sat in the darkness in the lower room before the hour of moonrise, she was aware of the shadowy watcher pacing dimly up and down, trusting solely in the darkness, and taking no advantage this time of the shelter of the hedge.

Vaguely as she had made out his aspect, she knew him for the same, and she watched his goings to and fro the door of the neighboring house was suddenly thrown open, and a broad ray of light darting from it fell full upon the mysterious prowler's face. The face was, of course, Ned Blane's.

Mary was in a permanent mood now to be easily indignant, and she rose up in wrath against this intrusion upon her privacy. What right had he, or any man, to hang about in that way, watching her and spying upon her? Some sense of the unobtrusive and wordless devotion of the watcher touched her here, and brought her down from the heights of anger. And yet the proceeding was intolerable, and sooner or later was sure to be discovered, to bring about new whisperings of scandal and new unmerited sorrow.

Blane had recoiled at the sudden ray of light, and had disappeared before these varying thoughts and emotions had well had time to course through her heart and mind. But now he was back again, pacing up and down in the darkness. She could see the pale blur of his face turned steadfastly toward the house.

She determined to ignore him, and withdrew herself from the window. She would not even know of his being there, but that was difficult. Even when she had gone to her bedroom, and having prepared for her night's rest blew out the light, she peeped again through an interstice in the blind and saw the dim figure still going up and down.

The morning after this discovery Mary received a second letter from the mysterious Hargreaves, enclosing a second remittance, with the same formula as before. At first she did not notice any difference of address, but by and by her eye lighted upon the first line of the communication, and she saw that it was nated, not from Keston, but from Kirton Square. The forger had relied upon his memory, and his memory had played him false.

She set out at once for the great town, determined, if possible, to unravel the mystery, and at least to discover if Kirton stood in as airy a situation as his forerunner. There was no Kirton Square to be found or heard of, and she came back troubled.

That night the watcher came again. A painful fascination impelled her by this time to keep as regular a watch for him as he evidently kept upon the house, and as he came in sight a suspicion burst upon her mind with so vivid and sudden a light that it looked like certainty. She lit a candle hastily, ran upstairs, and emptied the contents of a drawer upon the bed, and from the tumbled heap of papers before her, after a search of a moment or two, took a letter from Ned Blane to her husband, and setting this and the communication from John Hargreaves side by side, came, in spite of the stiff disguise of the legal-looking calligraphy, to the swift conclusion that they were written by the same hand.

It was bitter enough in all conscience to have been deserted by her husband, even though she confessed to herself that she had never loved him; it was heartbreaking to be deserted by the people of her own flesh and blood; but to be insulted by the cheating charity of a rejected lover seemed tenfold worse than all.

She descended to the dining room, and taking the bank note from the table on which it lay, crumpled it wrathfully in her hand and walked swiftly from the room into the hall, and from the hall into the roadway. The furtive watcher was away at a round pace in an instant, but she followed and called upon him by name.

"Mr. Blane! I will not be avoided. I order you to listen to me."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Ned Blane stood stock still in the dark and said nothing.

"How dare you insult me by your charity?" Mary asked him. She panted with haste and excitement, and her limbs were trembling.

Ned, with his hands in his jacket pockets, his shoulders rounded, and his head drooping a little, made no movement and answered never a word. In the act of walking away from her he had paused at her call of command, and his back was still half turned toward her. Mary, who had not yet begun to cool from the impulse of indignant attack which had inspired her to rush after him, took a further step or two and stood before him.

"How dare you insult me by your charity?" she asked again, clenching the crumpled note in her hand.

Still he said nothing. His figure, dimly outlined in the dark as it was, had a look of dogged impassivity about it which was discouraging.

"This came from you," she said, holding out the crumpled bank note. "You must take it back again."

She held out the note almost timidly, and her eyes searched in vain for any sign of change or relenting in the dogged figure before her.

His immobility was exasperating, but it was not easy to see what ought to be done in face of it. She was more than half inclined for a moment to drop the note and go, but that would hardly have been courteous. It was difficult to be courteous to a man so obstinate. Possibly he might be amenable to reason. The reason of the position was certainly wholly on her side, and he could not be so stupid as to be blind to it. She began to reason with him.

"Surely, Mr. Blane, you must see how wrong you are in sending this to me."

Mr. Blane was apparently decided to see nothing. Any movement in the obdurate figure, any shuffle of the foot, for a sign of yielding or uneasiness, any silent negative to urge her to an argument, would have been welcome.

"I can't accept this," she went on desperately. "It was cruel to trap me into taking the other. What would you think of anybody, Mr. Blane, who laid such a trap to humiliate you and catch your self-respect? How dare you pretend that this came fromm y husband? What right have you to send me money? What did I ever give you for treating me so?"

To all this the detected benefactor answered nothing.

"Take it!" she said imperiously, for by this time her own speech had warmed her anew into anger. He made no response, and when she had waited for a full half minute, with the note extended in her hand, she moved away. "I shall send this to you by post," she said frigidly, "and I will ask you not to write to me or speak to me again."

She walked from him indignantly, and when she had gone but a step or two turned her head to look at him. He kept his posture—head drooping, shoulders rounded, the obstinate hands rammed into the side pockets. But somehow it did not look as if obstinacy alone were expressed in the posture of the figure. Now that she was but a little distance away from it, it began to seem solitary, bitterly solitary. A sense of pity touched her. The thought of her own loneliness and unhappiness brought tears to her eyes. She could scarcely leave him in that ungrateful and ungracious way, impracticable and obstinate as he was. She turned and spoke again, and the tears sounded in her voice.

"You must not think I don't feel that you meant to be kind. I know you meant to act delicately and like a friend. But you must see how impossible it is. Will you take this, Mr. Blane? I would much rather you took it from me. Pray take it."

His continued silence drove her away in a new anger, and she did not turn again until she reached the gate. Then she could dimly see his figure in the roadway. A break in the hedge beyond where he stood allowed the drooping head to be seen in more defined outline against the sky. She entered the house and left him there, and all night long the fancy of the silent and solitary figure standing there oppressed her. She was often angered by it, and as often pitiful over it; but the gust of anger was strong and long, and the pity was a mere lull in the wind.

Ned heard the retiring footsteps, the retreating rustle of the dress, the clank of the gate latch, the fatal sound of the closing door. He stood still for a long time. It was not worth while to move. There was nothing to do, nothing to hope for, nowhere to go. Nothing mattered very much. Nothing seemed able very much to hurt him.

By and by he heard laughing voices coming down the lane. They were vulgar and discordant and the laughter was out of tune with everything. He walked on, taking little if any note of whither his footsteps led him, and at last, in something very like a waking dream walked past his own house.

(To be continued.)

Another Loft Story.

Grandfather Hollis was ready and willing to tell stories as long as he had eager listeners, but once embarked on the sea of narrative, he allowed no ship to cross his bows. If one did he "put back to shore to once," to use his own words. His greatest trial was his own nephew, Abijah Hobbs, who apparently could not refrain from asking questions at every turn. Many a good story had been lost in this way, so when Grandfather Hollis started a famous tale at a Thanksgiving party, Abijah was requested to keep still.

"'Twas on a story night in November, '59," began Grandfather Hollis, "and the wind had been a-moaning all day long; the sky also had a sort of a greenish color, and now and then there'd be a scud o' gray clouds across it. I knew something was going to happen, and 'long about 3 o'clock in the afternoon I took a look about the farm to see that everything was all right, animals under shelter and so on; took the cows in, fixed up the barn tight and come back into the house.

"I was kind of uneasy and kep' my eyes out o' the windows, watching the clouds, and sighting the boats over on the bay side as they come in; but there wasn't anything really out o' the way till about 5, or maybe quarter past. Then all of a sudden I heard a low muttering an' I sprung to the back window. Just in a line with the window in those days there was a maple tree——"

The listeners were all breathless, bending toward Grandfather Hollis, and for one fatal moment Abijah's wife allowed her vigilant gaze to leave her husband's face.

"Say, was it a sugar-maple?" cried Abijah.

Hunting in New Brunswick.

Of course, all guides claim to be moose callers, but experience teaches that very few are successful, says the Illustrated Sporting News. In talking with some of the best of them they united in saying that a woman, if she would practice calling for two weeks or so, could surpass any man. What is needed is a high, clear voice. The calling is done with a birch-bark horn, shaped like a megaphone. It should be about sixteen inches long, six inches across the large end and about one inch at the mouthpiece. The call is two short grunts, followed by a long bellow in imitation of the call given by the cow moose. The bull, in answering, gives from one to three or four short, hoarse grunts.

During the summer the caribou come into the lakes at all times of the day and night, but later on go back on the barrens and remain there until the snow drives them down to the timber. It's hard hunting, as the climb to the barrens is rough and very tiresome. Then, too, on account of their keen scent and hearing, so much allowance must be made for all winds and air currents that even on sighting game long detours have to be made in order that the approach may be made up wind.

Naming the Hotel.

Bill—"He wanted a name for his new hotel."

Jill—"Were there any suggested?"

"Yes a fellow suggested calling it the Rheumatic Gout, because it was a swell joint."—Yonkers Statesman.

If a music teacher can't make anything else out of the voice of an heiress he can make money.

The more some men talk the more trouble they pile up for themselves.